



Tony Blair

Author: James Crossley

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Summary

During the past fifty years, Tony Blair—Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 1997–2007—has been the most explicit example of a leader from one of the main UK political parties employing apocalyptic language in his speeches. Blair reapplied older socialist language about the radical transformation of the nation to an explanation for religious violence and to persuade audiences familiar with such traditions of the need for military intervention abroad. Previously, this language had been used to support ideas of creating the National Health Service and developing the welfare state in the aftermath of the Second World War—a New Jerusalem, even. In the 2000s, Blair applied this language as part of his promise to help save a range of countries (including Muslim-majority countries) from what he saw as the tyranny of evil, chaos, and the perversion of a purer religious past, and to transform them into thriving liberal democracies and homes of religious toleration. Connected with his use of apocalyptic language and his enthusiasm for transforming the world were claims regularly made by others that Blair acted or even saw himself in messianic terms. While such claims were common criticisms of Blair, his use of apocalyptic language to justify military intervention and explain religious violence has had a lasting impact on British political leaders.

Biographical Details

Anthony Charles Lynton Blair was born on 6 May 1953 in Edinburgh. After spending much of his childhood in Durham, his family returned to Edinburgh where he was privately educated at Fettes College. While he had hopes of working in music management, he followed a more conventional route of studying law (1972–1975) at St John's College, University of Oxford, before training as a barrister, where he would meet Cherie Booth who he later married. Where Booth continued her career in law, Blair went into Labour Party politics and became the Member of Parliament for Sedgefield, County Durham, in 1983. At this time, Blair was on the soft Left of the party but moved rightwards and, as party leader from 1994, he became a key figure in shifting the Labour Party towards a form of social democracy that embraced the economics associated with Margaret Thatcher now called 'neoliberalism.' After becoming Prime Minister in 1997 (at 43 he was the youngest Prime Minister in nearly two-hundred years), Blair became increasingly associated with military interventions, notably in Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003). It was after the most prominent terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda on the World Trade Center (New York), and the American-led 'War on Terror' including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, that brought

his use of apocalyptic language to the fore both in his speeches and in the media. But this was also language grounded in Blair's religious beliefs and understandings of religious histories.

Blair's Religion

It was during his time at Oxford that his interest in politics and religion intensified and that he was confirmed as an Anglican. Blair claimed that while 'I was brought up as [a Christian], I was not in any real sense a practising Christian until I went to Oxford' (interviewed in McCloughry 1993). Blair had a broadly centre-left understanding of Christianity with a range of influences but probably no-one was as influential on his beliefs as the Australian Anglican priest and Christian Socialist, Peter Thomson. Blair has credited Thomson with helping him combine the worlds of religion and politics. Blair explained Thomson's influence and this categorisation of 'religion' and 'politics' in terms of how religion starts as a set of values while politics starts as an examination of society and how to change it. When brought together, religion provides a suitable framework for developing this transformation (Blair 2010, 78).

Prior to becoming leader of the Labour Party, Blair kept relatively quiet about his Christianity. However, in 1992 he joined the Christian Socialist Movement, partly through the influence of the then Labour leader, John Smith (Rentoul 1996, 47, 293). Blair's theology stressed ideas of social relevance, social change, and social mobility, while still emphasising the importance of the relationship between the individual and the community. In a 1993 interview, when he was Shadow Home Secretary, Blair was still using the language of socialism and implicitly critiquing Thatcherism but was doing so in a way typical of frontbench Labour politicians of the time: incorporating Thatcherite ideas associated with individualism, personal responsibility, and community support beyond the welfare state (McCloughry 1993; Crossley 2016, 213-15). Blair likewise incorporated ideas of economic liberalism into his understanding of what Christianity should be as well as adding ideas about social liberalism (e.g., equality of gender and sexuality, pro-choice on abortion, pro-contraception, etc.).

Blair's liberalism dovetailed into his ecumenicalism and his interests in interreligious harmony and dialogue. From interviews with Blair and his close associates, it is clear that by the time he was Prime Minister, these were keen interests: he believed that the Abrahamic traditions essentially worshipped the same God and that most religions shared the same values (Kampfner 2004, 74; Stephens 2004, 25-26; Burton and McCabe 2009, 9; Rawnsley 2010, 173, 410, 448). There are hints that Blair also embraced various 'new age' spiritualities. While the tabloids frequently associated these ideas with Cherie Blair and the family adviser and 'lifestyle guru' (Pidd 2010) Carole Caplin, Blair seems to have been comfortable in such contexts, such as when he expressed his desire for world peace after a symbolic 'rebirthing ritual' (Baldwin 2001). In the aftermath of the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Blair's interest in Islam intensified while he also became associated (often controversially) with the American president George W. Bush and his brand of American Christian evangelicalism. As widely expected, Blair became a Catholic (as his immediate family were) after stepping down as Prime Minister, though his views on social liberalism were often at odds with the Vatican (Seldon 2004, 516, 521-26; Rawnsley 2010, 449). He continued his ecumenical thinking through various initiatives, including the Tony Blair Faith Foundation which was founded in 2008 with the aim of countering extremism in, and promoting understanding between, 'all six leading religions' (here understood to be Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism) which he saw as essential for global policy making (BBC 2008; Crossley 2016,

217-18).

Crucial for Blair's understanding of religion is his understanding of democracy. He claimed that rather than ignoring religion, politicians could promote 'religion-friendly democracy and democracy-friendly religion' (Press Association 2012). Behind the soundbites, Blair believed that religion in its purest form supported ideas of a secular government, liberty, equality, and other values associated with liberal democracy. Understanding a given tradition's scriptures was therefore crucial for Blair—he even claimed to read both the Bible and the Qur'an daily both for general instructive purposes and insights into the globalised world (Adams 2011; cf. Rawnsley 2000, 276; 2010, 36). For Blair, scriptures pointed to purer democratic and tolerant origins of a religion behind later illiberal corruptions. Where illiberal sentiments appear present in scriptures, they were to be countered with more 'metaphorical' readings, a prioritising of other parts of scriptures, and modified and updated in line with contemporary progressive values held by the community (Crossley 2016, 220-39). Working with such a model, Blair condemned parts of Christian history for persecuting non-believers and heretics as a distortion of Christianity and of what he saw as its original message of compassion and love (Blair 2010, 347; cf. 1993, 9). This logic allowed Blair to provide an idealistic overview of the history of Islam as a religion which started out inspired by the Qur'an as progressive, morally upright, rational, and enlightened but which has too often declined, he argued, into dictatorship and support for acts of extremist violence such as those carried out on 11 September 2001 (Hari 2009, 52; Blair 2010, 347). In line with his thinking on purer scriptural origins, Blair has read different versions of the Qur'an in order, he suggested, to find counter arguments against violent or extremist readings (Rawnsley 2010, 44).

Blair's Apocalyptic Theology

Blair's approach to religion and scriptures was brought into the service of his foreign policy preferences and served as a justification for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the accompanying 'War on Terror' against terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and their sympathisers. Blair's apocalyptic language came to the fore and involved ideas of the dramatic transformation of different parts of the world in line with his idealised understandings of democracy and religion. Certainly, Blair had long seen Christianity in binaries such as 'right and wrong, good and bad' (Blair 1993, 12) and he had seen previous interventions abroad in apocalyptic terms. As his agent and friend John Burton put it, Blair 'believed strongly, although he couldn't say it at the time, that intervention in Kosovo, Sierra Leone—Iraq too—was all part of the Christian battle; good should triumph over evil' (Burton and McCabe 2009, xv). But when it came to the War on Terror, Blair was more open in making such statements. In his statement following the 11 September 2001 attacks, Blair argued that 'this is not a battle between the United States of America and terrorism, but between the free and democratic world and terrorism...[we] will not rest until this evil is driven from our world' (Blair 2001a; 2010, 346). Intentionally or not, Blair's preface to the 2002 British government document which claimed that Iraq had Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) that could be deployed within 45 minutes (Blair 2002) contributed to the prominence of catastrophic language in the media. As the popular *Sun* newspaper claimed (25 September 2002), 'BRITS 45mins FROM DOOM.'

It was Blair's major speeches designed to attract party and parliamentary support for the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions that included Blair's most sustained use of apocalyptic language. In his (successful) attempt to win over the 2001 Labour Party conference for the invasion of Afghanistan, Blair spoke in terms echoing

biblical or quasi-biblical and apocalyptic language with reference to, for instance, 'an act of evil,' 'we were with you at the first. We will stay with you to the last,' 'the shadow of this evil,' 'lasting good,' 'hope amongst all nations,' 'a new beginning,' 'justice and prosperity for the poor and dispossessed,' 'the starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor' (cf., e.g., Genesis 17; Isaiah 1:16–17; 42:5–7; 49:6–13; Micah 2:1; Psalm 5:4; 23; Proverbs 28:1–28; Mark 13:10; Matthew 5:1–16; 12:21; Luke 6:20–49; Romans 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:2; Colossians 1:27; 1 John 5:19; Revelation 6; 22:13). A fuller extract shows how such language was employed as part of Blair's liberal interventionism and justification for the transformation of what he saw as the most impoverished countries, including Muslim-majority ones:

In retrospect, the Millennium marked only a moment in time. It was the events of September 11 that marked a turning point in history, where we confront the dangers of the future and assess the choices facing humankind. It was a tragedy. An act of evil...We [the British nation] were with you [the American people] at the first. We will stay with you to the last...It is that out of the shadow of this evil, should emerge lasting good: destruction of the machinery of terrorism wherever it is found; hope amongst all nations of a new beginning where we seek to resolve differences in a calm and ordered way; greater understanding between nations and between faiths; and above all justice and prosperity for the poor and dispossessed, so that people everywhere can see the chance of a better future through the hard work and creative power of the free citizen, not the violence and savagery of the fanatic. I know that here in Britain people are anxious, even a little frightened. I understand that...Don't kill innocent people. We are not the ones who waged war on the innocent. We seek the guilty...Today the threat is chaos...The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of Northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause. This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us. (Blair 2001b)

In addition to Blair's Christian background, there are numerous possible influences on his use of such language. Some of these influences may have come from American political discourse, such as ideas about a 'clash of civilisations' and the apocalyptic evangelicalism associated with Bush, all of which were part of the popular debates in the media surrounding the War on Terror (cf. Brown 2014). But probably the most direct influences come from apocalyptic language in English political discourse (Crossley 2016, 229–33).

Journalists typically missed the important allusions in Blair's speech, partly because it was aimed at an insider audience knowledgeable about the Labour Party and its place in British political history. The Beveridge Report commissioned during the Second World War challenged the 'evil giants' of 'want,' 'squalor,' 'disease,' and 'ignorance.' This challenge was taken up in the Labour Party manifesto of 1945 which would form the basis of the most celebrated government in Labour mythmaking, particularly with reference to the creation of the National Health Service and development of the welfare state. Written in the aftermath of the Second World War, the manifesto also railed against 'Japanese barbarism' and 'Nazi tyranny and aggression,' claiming 'Victory in war must be followed by a prosperous peace' and, in a line that Blair would echo in his call for international support for the War on Terror, that 'we should build a new United Nations, allies in a new war on hunger, ignorance and want.' Order and chaos—words likewise favoured by Blair—were also part of the 1945 manifesto which stated: 'The Labour Party stands for order

as against the chaos which would follow the end of all public control. We stand for order, for positive constructive progress as against the chaos' (Labour Party 1945).

This idea of building a 'New Jerusalem' (Revelation 3:12; 21:2) on the rubble of war and/or deprivation has a long socialist history in Britain, including in the Labour Party generally and the Labour government of 1945 specifically. It is language still invoked and the singing of 'Jerusalem' from William Blake's poem 'Milton' has been a fixture of post-War Labour conferences ('Till we have built Jerusalem/In England's green and pleasant land'). Given the sensitivities surrounding Israel and Palestine, it is no surprise that Blair avoided the language of 'Jerusalem' in his speeches. But the allusion to the widely appreciated apocalyptic language of dramatic social transformation for the victims of want, squalor, disease, and a new life for the poor, oppressed, dispossessed, ignorant, and wretched of the earth, was language that could be used to convince his ambivalent party to support the invasion of Afghanistan with the assumption that it would be one country among many that would experience the transformation Britain once had in the aftermath of war.

Implicit in Blair's speech was also a central national story which resonated far beyond the Labour Party—namely, the Second World War. In his speech to Parliament on the eve of the Iraq War in 2003 (and thus to an audience across the main political parties), Blair softened his allusions to the 1945 manifesto but made clear his allusions to the Second World War and the figure of Winston Churchill. While he was aware of the difficulties of making analogies between the 1930s and 2002, Blair nevertheless argued that 'lessons' could be learned: 'It is that, with history, we know what happened. We can look back and say, "There's the time; that was the moment; that's when we should've acted"' (Blair 2003). Blair fused this favoured piece of national history to update the apocalyptic language from the Labour tradition. This recontextualization allowed Blair to smooth over the problems of historical analogies. At the crucial point in his argument ('why I believe that the threat we face today is so serious and why we must tackle it'), Blair returned to the language of chaos and order to narrow down his precise targets:

The threat today is not that of the 1930s...the world is ever more interdependent...The key today is stability and order. The threat is chaos and disorder—and there are two begetters of chaos: tyrannical regimes with weapons of mass destruction and extreme terrorist groups who profess a perverted and false view of Islam. (Blair 2003)

Blair's speech played an important role in convincing Parliament to support the war in Iraq and it had a significant influence on mainstream parliamentary political discourse where the often-fantastical language of tyranny, evil, and a monstrous 'perversion of Islam' has been employed by leading politicians (including Blair's successors as Prime Ministers) to justify military intervention abroad and explain acts of terror while rhetorically avoiding implications that foreign policy or material conditions have played a role in religious violence (Crossley 2018; cf. Mason 2014).

Another part of this legacy is that Blair's use of such language, coupled with his enthusiasm for liberal interventionism, has contributed to the common claim that Blair behaved (and behaves) like a 'messiah' or

has a 'messiah complex.' These have regularly been repeated polemical claims made against Blair by opponents, though they have also been made by long-time colleagues and political commentators (for a range of such claims, see, e.g., North 2006; Budowsky 2010; Short 2010; Barber 2012; Owen 2012; Sandbrook 2012; Press Association 2014). From the political right, Richard North's (2006) critique of Blair's transformational rhetoric and agenda carries the blunt title, *Mr Blair's Messiah Politics: Or What Happened When Bambi Tried to Save the World*. Robert Harris—the journalist, novelist and, by this point, one-time friend of Blair—claimed in the context of a discussion of Blair's militarism and financial interests that,

It's a cliché to say that most politicians go mad if they're in office for more than about six or seven years, and they become a member of a club and you become quite disconnected from reality, and I think there were in Tony things we perhaps didn't realise at the time—of narcissism, a messiah complex, that had merely accelerated this impulse in him. (Harris, interviewed in Bowie 2014)

Similar comments concerning messianic tendencies, and Blair's shift towards a radically different mindset in light of his foreign policy, were made about Blair's 2010 memoirs which, if anything, fuelled the claims that Blair had a 'messiah complex.' Clare Short—the former Labour MP who served under Blair before resigning from the government in 2003—said of the book that she 'was surprised by how messianic and hubristic it is right from the start. Early on, Blair was not like this' (Short 2010). Indeed, there is evidence that Blair himself contributed to this perception, intentionally or otherwise, and not just in his speeches about global transformation during the 'War on Terror.' One instance that made newspaper headlines was when he was prompted to write the location of 'home' in the VIP visitors' guest book at the British Embassy in Washington. Blair did not write the location of one of his British homes but rather wrote 'Jerusalem,' where he occasionally stayed at the American Colony Hotel as part of his work as the special envoy and representative for the Middle East Quartet (Walters 2009).

Further Reading

Blair's communications team were convinced his religious beliefs were a problem for voters and would be misrepresented in the media. A conscious effort was therefore made to avoid discussing religion wherever possible. Nevertheless, religious language remained present (if somewhat muted) in Blair's speeches, and some of Blair's beliefs could not be kept fully away from the media gaze. The key speeches for Blair's use of apocalyptic language are those at the Labour Party conference in 2001 (Blair 2001b) and to Parliament in 2003 just before the Iraq war (Blair 2003). When he stepped down as Prime Minister, Blair was much more open in discussing his religious views, as he did in more detail in his autobiography (Blair 2010). There is some work on Blair's religious rhetoric, in accounts by figures close to Blair (e.g., Burton and McCabe 2009) and in general scholarly or historical treatments of religion in English politics (e.g., Dale 2000; Spencer 2011; Crines and Theakston 2015; Crossley 2016). Crossley (2016, 210–41) additionally focuses on Blair's apocalyptic language.

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